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HIV's 'missing link' found in ill chimps

WASHINGTON: Scientists believe they have found a "missing link" in the evolution of the virus that causes AIDS. It bridges the gap between the infection that does no harm to most monkeys and the one that kills millions of people.

That link is a virus that is killing chimpanzees in the wild at a disturbingly high rate, according to a study in today's issue of the journal Nature. Chimpanzees are the first primate besides man shown to get sick in the wild in significant numbers from a virus related to HIV.

But the discovery of the disease killing chimps may help doctors come up with better treatments or a workable vaccine for humans, experts said.

The monkey version of the virus that causes AIDS is called simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV), but most apes and monkeys that have it show no symptoms or illness. So "if we could

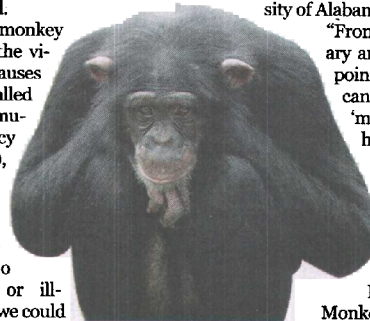


figure out why the monkeys don't get sick, perhaps we could apply that to people," said study lead author Beatrice Hahn, a professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

"From an evolutionary and epidemiological point of view, these data can be regarded as a 'missing link' in the history of the HIV pandemic," AIDS researcher Dr Daniel Douek of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said.

Monkeys and apes — ex-